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Current Support Brief

HURRICANE FLORA DAMAGE
TO THE CUBAN TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM
REPAIRED RAPIDLY



CIA/RR CB 63-96

29 November 1963

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

Office of Research and Reports

SECRET

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W A R N I N G

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HURRICANE FLORA DAMAGE
TO THE CUBAN TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM
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The Cuban government has restored the important transportation routes in Oriente and Camaguey Provinces that were seriously damaged by hurricane Flora. The hurricane washed away roadbeds and damaged bridges on the two main railroad lines and stopped traffic in numerous places on secondary rail lines and roads. Because these two provinces are the agricultural heart of Cuba and also include some industry, transportation service to and within the area is vital to the economy. Reconstruction of the transportation system began almost immediately after the end of the hurricane, and considerable material resources and labor were allocated for this purpose.

1. Storm Damage

The hurricane damage to the transportation sector of the Cuban economy was second only to the damage received by the agricultural sector. A substantial number of railroad tracks, roads, and bridges were destroyed, damaged, or washed out in the two eastern provinces of Oriente and Camaguey. (For examples of storm damage, see Figures 1 through 4.) A Cuban press report stated that in the eastern part of the island the hurricane damaged more than 50 bridges, destroyed close to 11,000 meters (7 miles) of railroad track, and left more than 13,000 meters (8 miles) of track damaged, with the roadbed caved in or washed away at the edges. 1/ This report was partly confirmed by a study of hurricane damage from aerial photography taken soon after the hurricane, * which showed the Central Highway and main railroad lines in the two provinces interrupted in about 13 places. 2/

2. Importance of Damaged Areas to the Economy

The high priority given to the reconstruction of transport facilities to Oriente Province, and to Santiago de Cuba in particular, undoubtedly stemmed from the importance of the area to the Cuban economy. Santiago is the most important industrial center for the eastern half of the island. The petroleum refinery and the cement plant located

* On 10 and 12 October 1963.

there, to mention only two of the city's industries, disbribute their products throughout the eastern half of Cuba. Oriente Province is a significant contributor to food supplies for the entire island and an important producer of industrial or export crops such as sugar, coffee, cotton, and livestock. Quick restoration of transport facilities was necessary to save as much of these crops as possible and to restore the land to production.

3. Reconstruction of the Transportation System

Reconstruction of rail lines in the area was given top priority by the government. On 10 October, the day after the hurricane ended, more than 400 members of railroad maintenance crews were working on the railroad lines. This number was later increased, 3/ and within 2 weeks the Ministry of Transportation had 2,000 workers engaged in repair of the railroads. 4/ According to a Havana television broadcast, a truck convoy of the Ministry of Construction that was loaded with construction equipment, including cranes and bulldozers, had left Las Villas Province on 12 October 1963 for Oriente Province. 5/

By 20 October 1963 the Ministry of Construction had started reconstruction of 8 railroad bridges in Oriente Province to restore railroad service, 6/ and about 20 other bridges, embankments, and foundations that were less severely damaged were to be repaired later by the Ministry of Transportation. 7/ Much Cuban military equipment and many personnel, who were diverted from training and counterinsurgency operations for hurricane relief, probably were employed in the reconstruction of transportation facilities. 8/

Aerial photography that was taken about 1 month after the hurricane and covered three-fourths of the 13 points of the main road and railroad lines interrupted by the storm indicated that most of the breaks had been repaired. 9/ Three out of every four bridges were repaired and were in use again. In one case an alternate highway bridge was constructed near a damaged bridge, and in another case repair equipment was in the area, although the bridge apparently was not yet repaired. All washouts on key routes appeared to have been repaired. 10/

From the information available, it appears that the Cuban government mobilized its resources quickly to repair the hurricane damage to key transport facilities. Although such damage was extensive and full restoration can be expected to take much more time, restoration of the transportation system to at least minimum operational level on important lines was completed within 1 month.

Although service provided by the Cuban railroads and highway transport has seriously deteriorated in recent years under the Castro regime, mainly because of the lack of maintenance of the networks and the inability to import spare parts for locomotives and motor vehicles, the transportation system has been able to handle the level of traffic generated by the depressed Cuban economy in 1963. However, the complete cessation of through traffic between major parts of the island for more than a short period of time would have created an intolerable situation. For this reason, the Cuban government was forced at considerable cost to allocate sufficient materials and manpower to make the necessary repairs.

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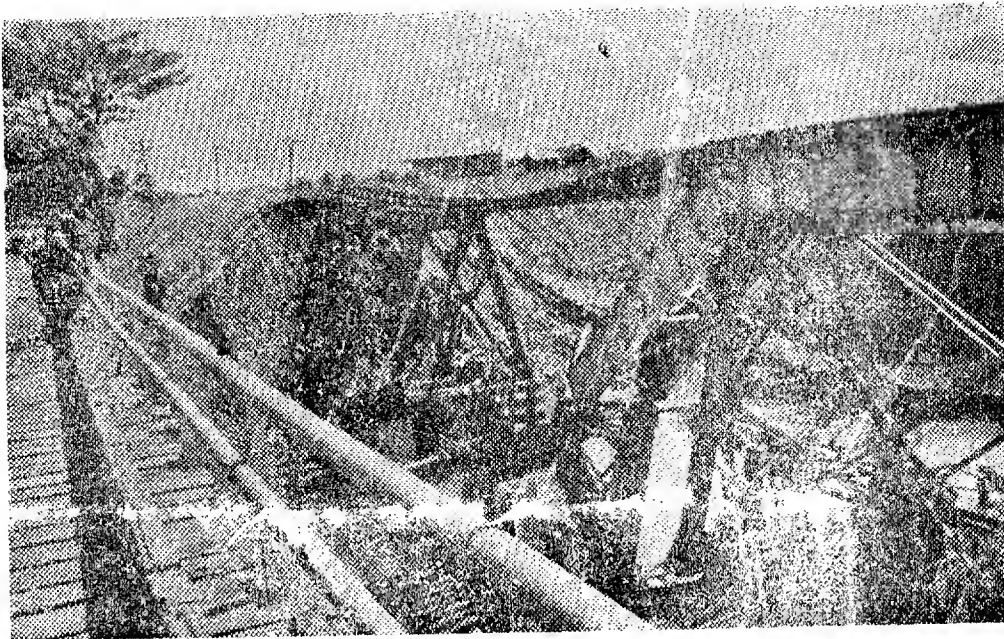


Figure 1. The San Rafael Bridge, Collapsed After Being Undermined by Floodwaters. The steel structure could not resist the pressure of the record high Najassa River waters.

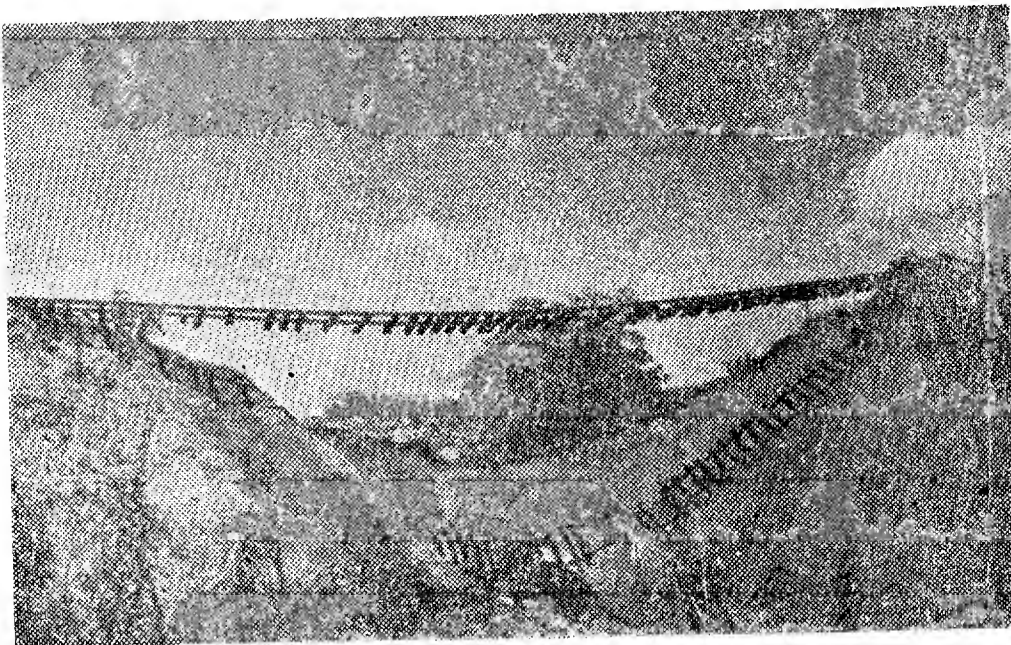


Figure 2. The Mao Bridge, Destroyed by the Flood. The entire support of the railroad right-of-way was washed away by the floodwaters.

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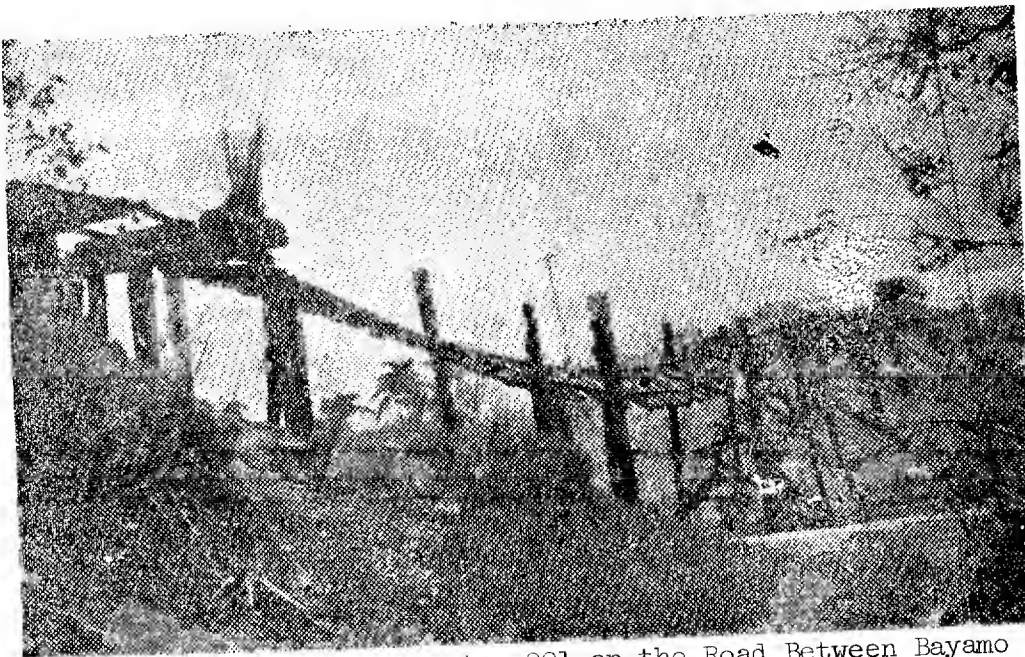


Figure 3. Bridge at Kilometer 221 on the Road Between Bayamo and San Luis. Another example of the damage done by the hurricane, the road suffered enormous damage in this area.



Figure 4. Bus Picked Up by Floodwaters and Washed Off the Road. The bus was washed off the road while trying to aid in the evacuation of the area around Camaguey.

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